

Netty C. Gross

IN EARLY MARCH, RACHEL ELIOR dropped a bombshell: The highly respected professor of Jewish mysticism suggested that the Essenes, an ascetic community commonly believed to have written the Dead Sea Scrolls, never existed.

The comment came in answer to a question on the roots of Jewish mysticism after a lecture Elior gave at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Anything to do with the Scrolls is news everywhere, and especially in Israel, and her theory soon found its way into the newspapers. The publicity preceded the publication soon afterward of her Hebrew-language book “Memory and Oblivion: The Mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls” in which she expounds the theory.

Elior, a tall dignified woman of 59, with jet black hair and blue eyes and a distinguished resumé, found herself in the midst of the latest series of controversies over a question which has plagued scholars since the cache of ancient religious documents was discovered in the 1950’s: Who wrote them?

The scrolls were found by Beduin shepherds between 1947 and 1956, in caves in and around Wadi Qumran near the ruins of the ancient settlement of Khirbet Qumran, about a kilometer from the shores of the Dead Sea. The 930 scrolls and fragments of parchment and papyrus include some of the only known surviving copies of Biblical documents written before 300 CE, and shed light on information about faith and ritual during the Second Temple period and serve as a link between Judaism and Christianity. Written in Hebrew and Aramaic by some 500 different hands, they are considered the most important archaeological find of the past century.

Publication of the scrolls was delayed for decades, due mainly to the inertia of the original editors, beginning with Father Roland de Vaux. The French Dominican priest, who was editor-in-chief of the publication of the Scrolls until he died in 1971, never published a definitive archaeological report of his work at Qumran. He and the editors succeeding him were accused of moving too slowly in opening the content of the scrolls to wider study. De Vaux and the Israeli scholar-soldier-politician Yigal Yadin, laid the foundations of the mainstream theories regarding the scrolls’ origins and the identity of the community in Qumran.

By the time the scrolls were published in their entirety in 2001 under the direction of Hebrew University Professor Emanuel Tov, scholars had formed a consensus that they were



A MINORITY VIEW: Prof. Rachel Elior contends that the scrolls were written by the deeply conservative Sadducees, descendants of the High Priest Zadok

Old Scrolls, New Controversy

An Israeli scholar ruffles feathers by claiming that the Essenes never existed and could not have authored the Dead Sea Scrolls